

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

“Riding quickly down a ramp is a taste of freedom”

INTERVIEW WITH FRAUKE MEYN

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**When one thinks of Afghanistan and development aid on the ground there, one thing is unlikely to occur to anyone – skateboarding. And yet the Skateistan NGO, founded in 2009, is now one of the most successful development projects in and around Kabul and has been honoured with a number of awards.**

**Currently the organisation is developing a similar project in Cambodia.**

**We spoke to Frauke Meyn from Skateistan, a certified sports scientist and with Skateistan since December 2010. Initially in Kabul, Afghanistan as Education Coordinator, then in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Frauke is now back in Germany and working in the new Skateistan headquarters in Berlin as Programs Manager.**

**Frauke, you discovered Skateistan at a relatively early stage when the project was not all that well-known – what inspired you to get on board with “skating in Afghanistan” – you spent quite a while there – a sense of adventure?**

Three years ago as a student in Cologne, I happened upon “Skateistan” more or less by accident. As an enthusiastic “board athlete” myself, I was immediately enthralled by the project. “Skateistan” really stood out from the whole range of development projects involving sport and which generally focus on more traditional sports. The idea of doing development cooperation with such an unconventional sport like skateboarding fascinated me. I also wanted to use my degree in sports science to do some good.

**But why Afghanistan?**

It simply fascinated me. You hear and read so much about Afghanistan in the media, but very few people know what it is really like there. That is enough to make one – or me at least - curious.

**Skateistan was the very first to introduce skateboarding as a sport in Afghanistan. By now though you have an indoor skating arena of around 1750 m<sup>2</sup>. And boards also need to be bought for the children – how in the beginning did you manage to win over sponsors and people to invest in this project?**

One huge advantage was certainly the fact that the idea was very unusual – the combination of Afghanistan, girls and skateboarding.

**In Afghanistan with its tribal structures and social extremes, awakening a feeling of community among young people that transcends these divisions must be an enormous challenge. Skateistan’s founder Oliver Percovich wants to achieve this through skateboarding lessons. Does it work?**

It works really well. I think that sport in particular can be used as a very effective tool in development cooperation, as you can see from other development projects. The social potential of sport is well known. Sport can overcome many boundaries, social, cultural and linguistic. This gives sport an enormous advantage when the success of a project is dependent on overcoming such boundaries.

Instigating initial contact with the local population and building trust is often difficult in development cooperation projects. Sport helps overcome these first hurdles.

**But why did you decide to focus on skateboarding? What are the advantages compared to the classics of sport promotion projects, football and basketball?**

Skateboarding is special because it does not involve a competitive element. It is not about competing against one another and more about getting out and doing sports together, sharing a passion. Emotions are shared, successes celebrated, fears overcome. Additionally the so-called trendy sports often develop their own subcultures in which children and youths share more than just the sport. An entire world develops around it.

Added to this is the fact that everyone is equal on a skateboard. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, what religion or ethnicity you belong to.

**In Kabul space for sport and leisure activities is already very limited, but it is even harder for girls to find ways to spend their free time. You just mentioned that boys and girls can skate together at Skateistan. Does that mean your project is changing gender roles? How has that been received in Afghan society?**

We offer separate classes for boys and girls in Kabul because girls simply feel more comfortable that way. They can practice without interruption in a very private environment. For girls it is often the only opportunity to be physically active. Many have never done sports before; it is a unique experience for them to see how their bodies feel in motion.

Since skateboarding was unknown in Afghanistan, we have an advantage: it is not considered a men's sport like it is in many countries. From the very beginning we took great care to involve girls and offer them the same opportunities as the boys. Afghan society has reacted very openly to skateboarding, many are very curious. It is not unusual for the local police force to step onto a board during an outdoor session.

**You homepage offers a lot of clips that provide an impression of the project. The videos show so many faces glowing with happiness – PR or reality?**

Reality!

Any skateboarder knows first-hand how successfully completing an easy trick can bring a smile to your face. Riding quickly down a ramp is a taste of freedom. We have a long waiting list of children who would like to register, an indication that the children are having a good time. Skateboarding often allows them to forget their daily lives, not an easy thing to do, for an hour at least. They can simply tune out and be children again.

**Along with your range of physical education classes, you also built classrooms in Kabul in which you offer courses like how to use computer – how has this been received by the kids? What sort of education are you trying to provide?**

Unlike Germany, for example, where many children and young people see attending school as an annoying "must", many children in developing countries see education as an opportunity. For many going to school is a privilege. So our range of courses has been very positively received. We also try to teach things children are interested in. They play an active role in setting the curriculum.

In our classes we try to provide children with a voice, to offer them a platform where they can be heard, where their opinions count. In many public schools in Afghanistan, the focus is on teacher-centred learning. Pure facts are taught, which presents a problem. We really value group work since it teaches the kids important social skills. It also promotes a lot of creativity. Children are taught to form their own opinions and think critically about different topics. It is less about learning specific things and much more about the learning process in and of itself.

**Where do you see the greatest success in your work thus far?**

I think the greatest success so far has been that we have managed to ensure that 40% of the kids in our programme are girls.

**What situation on the ground has touched or impressed you the most?**

Fazila, 16-years-old, is one of our best female skateboard teachers. Before she came to Skateistan, she sold chewing gum on the streets. Last year she had the opportunity to speak at a conference for civil society organised in part by the London School of Economics. She was the guest of honour from the Kabul programme and the youngest speaker. Finding out about the life-story of such girls is amazing: from a chewing-gum seller to a skateboard teacher with the self-confidence to speak to such an important audience.

**But we are still talking about Afghanistan where dangerous and heartbreaking situations continue to dominate everyday life, unfortunately. What was your worst or saddest experience?**

A few months ago a Skateistan student was injured in a suicide bombing. That was the saddest thing I've experienced.

**Skateistan is expanding and is now in Cambodia too. In Kabul, the central idea was to strengthen a feeling of community. What is your goal in Cambodia?**

At the moment we are focusing on giving children in Cambodia who would never have been able to afford a skateboard or who have little access to leisure activities an opportunity to participate. In general "Skateistan" Cambodia differs from "Skateistan" Afghanistan in that we don't currently have any facilities in Phnom Penh. In contrast to Kabul where skateboard lessons and classes take place in our own skatepark, we work from the road in Cambodia.

**What does "working from the road" entail?**

We are working with a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that focus primarily on street children. The skating lessons are offered all over the place, like in the Olympic Stadium, in the skatepark of one of our partner NGOs or in our own guesthouse with neighbouring children. Besides skateboarding, we don't offer any other classes in Cambodia. This is why we are planning to build a public skatepark by the end of the year where we could then teach not only more children, but also bring children from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds together in one group. This is the positive experience we are taking from Kabul to Cambodia: skating can bring people together, overcome divisions. Maybe this is how we could succeed one day in organising an event with Cambodian and Afghan children.

**Cambodia is a completely different culture from Afghanistan – have you noticed differences in how the kids react to you and the project?**

Whether in Afghanistan or Cambodia, children simply love to skateboard and have fun doing it. That is really the best part: passion for the board knows no boundaries.

**What is next for Skateistan? Have you already planned the countries you'd like to expand to next?**

Not other countries, no, but we are scheduled to open our new skatepark in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan this August. It will be around twice as large as the one in Kabul and offer space for 1,000 children a week.

**Purely hypothetically: If you found the pot full of gold at the end of the rainbow that was never empty, giving you unlimited funds for Skateistan – what would you do or buy?**

It would be great if we had more funding that would allow us to teach more children in Afghanistan and possibly even build skateparks in other provinces.

Questions by Sarah Klein